

Finding Beauty

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At last year's Service Auction Jonathan Mason bought the right to choose a sermon topic. He wanted a sermon on beauty, and fortunately not a beautiful sermon, although the former is not without its challenges.

Though "beauty" has been defined frequently and variously, it is also famous as a word that should not be defined, and perhaps, cannot be.

To be honest I wasn't sure where to begin. But I've been inspired by two things this week. As any of you who are my Facebook friends know, I spent three days this week in Timaru getting to know the newest member of the whanau, Isobel Devon Richardson, born to Rachel's daughter Sophie and her husband Callum last Sunday afternoon. Of course, she is beautiful, says the grandfather proudly and predictably. I spent most of the visit just gazing at this particular miniature human miracle of new life. We forget how small we once were; how smooth the skin is, downy the hair; delicate the features. The beauty of every new born evokes memories and hopes, awe and reverence, longing and fulfilment; humility and heart-melting love. But what exactly is it that allows us to see, hear, taste, feel, and smell that a baby is beautiful? Another question might be: Is the baby innately beautiful or do we simply perceive the baby as beautiful?

My second source of inspiration was discovering Crispin Sartwell's immensely enjoyable book *Six Names of Beauty*. He is a professor of aesthetics at Dickinson College.

His book seeks to help us expand our experience of beauty and our means of expressing that experience, for ultimately beauty is an experience. Sartwell organises the book around six words for beauty from six cultures: English, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Japanese and Navaho. Each culture, in its art and spirituality, offers various possibilities of the beautiful. Sometimes they seem contradictory, such as the Greek who appreciated the perfect human form, while the Japanese celebrates the earthy and imperfect. Appropriating both views expands our capacity to find beauty in the Parthenon and a broken tea bowl.

The word beauty in English originally referred almost exclusively to women. We can assume that much of early writing in English was by men who liked women, for whom the women they called beautiful were the objects of perhaps their most intense desire. Western art proves the point. The female nude is the most frequent subject of artists, with the exception of Jesus and Mary. Many of the greatest masterpieces express erotic desire, from Titian's Venus and Cupid to Georgia O'Keefe's flowers. But sexual desire is not the only understanding of erotic. Art might express a desire for power, the spiritual, pleasure, a yearning for the world as seen in nature. All would be forms of erotic desire. Beauty in our culture is the object of our longing. Longing is an enduring state of desire that is unfulfilled. So, in its broadest sense beauty is always erotic; it is always a wanting. Since we all long, beauty is a universal object of human experience, but in different times and cultures, people experience different objects as beautiful.

Not only is the beautiful object something we long for, it does not linger. Why do we bring flowers to a funeral? There is an association between beauty and death. The loss that lingers in every beautiful thing intensifies desire. Sartwell argues that indeed, if we did not age, if things did not disintegrate, the experience of beauty would be impossible. Without loss, desire could be fulfilled at will; things would always be available to us.

Another aspect of the western understanding of beauty is that it serves as a mirror of the soul. There is a concept in Jungian psychology that when we fall in love, we project the shimmering image of our own soul, our own soulfulness, upon our beloved. He or she appears to us as *so* beautiful, and to gaze upon that person awakens us to an experience of soul. We often see that person as our soul mate.

If we've really fallen in love, we believe we *must* have that person or we will surely die. And in a sense this is true, because we will *feel* dead or desolate, emotionally and spiritually, if we are not in communion with our soul.

The trouble comes when we mistake the other, the object of our desire, as the necessary source of our soul life, placing that source beyond ourselves rather than within ourselves.

In some sense, what we find beautiful is a mirror of our own inner longings and soulfulness. We experience something as beautiful and desirable because it crystallises something imperfectly formed in ourselves.

So it is a paradox: does the experience of beauty emerge from within (as when we say “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”), or from without, given by things in themselves? There is no final answer to this question of whether the source of beauty is “out there” or “in here.” But through the relationship between the beautiful “in here” and the beautiful “out there,” we discover the treasure of meaning in each other, the world, and ourselves.

The Hebrew word for beauty, *yapha*, takes a position on the out there or in here debate. It sees beauty coming from the object of our desire. The original meaning of *yapha* is “to be bright, to glow.” A related Aramaic word means to blossom. It indicates a quality of the beautiful thing or person, rather than of the perceiver: a thing exudes its beauty. Beauty is something the beautiful object sheds or emits, like light: a thing is beautiful in virtue of what it gives.

Sartwell tells us how he loves to show things to his 2-year-old daughter Jane because virtually anything can be a source of wonder for her. Even Sartwell's 15-year-old son comments, “I never really saw the moon until I was showing it to Jane.”

But Sartwell is sure that his son did really see the moon, in his early life when his perception was as fresh as Jane's is now, and he recalls how his other son, as a creeping baby, crawled across a grassy lawn on a summer evening, reaching out for the bright full moon on the horizon, trying to put it in his mouth.

The sad thing is that, as we grow older, we become satiated with experience and with impressions. Our senses and desires become dulled, acclimated to things that were once astonishing. The glowing quality of *yapha*, the quality of shining and blooming, can wake us up again; reconnect us with the wondrous.

Sartwell writes:

The extraordinary deep-red rose at the moment of perfect bloom, the monarch butterfly emerging wet and sparkling from the chrysalis into the full light, the indigo bunting streaking in utter, iridescent cobalt toward the feeder—bluer than anything else in the world—these arrest our attention and refresh our sensations.

Part of why *yapha* wakes us up is not only because it shines, but also because it is ephemeral, fleeting. How soon the gorgeous cherry blossoms fall in a flurry of petal snow; how suddenly the bright bird that materialized on the branch darts away and is gone from sight. They are gone the moment we have them, and for this reason, they are always perfectly new. They give us something that we long for increasingly as we grow older in life—innocence. They not only express it in their very being, but they help us recover an “innocence of eye,” a capacity to really see with the eyes of wonder again.

I would probably have to give a series of sermons to give justice to the primary Hindu word for beauty, *sundara*. Having some appreciation for understanding it is important for Unitarians because Hindu spirituality had a great impact on the Transcendentalists, our Unitarian forbears.

Hindu sage Visvanatha claims the experience of beauty is “the twin brother of mystical experience, and the very life of it is super-sensuous wonder.” Think of the kama sutra. It is seen through western eyes as just an exotic manual for expressing erotic desire, but for the Hindu it is an avenue to spiritual exaltation. Sexuality is spiritual and its spirituality is erotic.

I find it a little difficult to pin down what *sundara* means. Sometimes the world flows through you and sometimes you flow through it. Sartwell makes the point that music is like that whether it is Bach or Reggae.

Did you know there are more Rastafarians in New Zealand than there are Unitarians by a large number? What attracts them is not just the smoking of ganja or weed. It is the music: Reggae. Rastafarian means God incarnate. Like Gospel music and the Blues it is the music of the oppressed. When Bob Marley sings *I Shot the Sheriff* or *The Harder They Come* or *Burning and Looting* his music is *sundara*. Our singing of our spirituality is more likely to make us beautiful than reciting our principles or listening to this sermon. Music flows through us and we flow through it.

Indian culture accepts and embraces the natural state of the body more easily than we in the west do. Although it's a culture that absolutely defies simple distillations, one could say that there is a sense of the human body and the body of the world—the physical—as the residence of the holy. A deity can reside in a clay or wooden icon, or in a human avatar. Indeed, unlike the Christian idea of the incarnation of God in man as a unique, cosmic anomaly, in Hinduism, incarnating into matter is *just what God does*, over and over endlessly in a dizzying array of manifestations. And unlike the schism between sexuality and spirituality found in the western tradition, the Hindu icons often show their deities tenderly or ecstatically coupled.

Of course, India isn't the only culture to celebrate the holy in matter. One might also have such an experience in a baroque cathedral in Italy or like I did in La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona where the light flowed through me. Or we might have such an experience in a cathedral of vaulted trees. I once did a civil union in an opening in the bush on Waiheke Island at the foot of its highest mountain, Maunganui. It was a temple like Unitarian Theodore Parker described as the idea of *sundara*, the beauty of holiness at home in the world:

Be ours a religion, which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.

The Greek contribution to the idea of beauty is *to kalon*. It connects beauty to the idea of knowledge or “illumination”.

I remember my father telling me Plato's parable of the cave. Plato pictured most of us as being like prisoners who have spent our whole lives shackled in a dark cave facing a stonewall. Behind us a fire is burning. Guards walk back and forth in front of the fire carrying various objects, causing a kind of flickering shadow play to be projected upon that wall. All that we can ever glean of the nature of things is based upon these vague, dancing shadows. In other words, we are incapable of direct perception of anything. We're not only in the dark, but all that we see is dim, distorted, and several times removed from things as they really are.

Plato further imagines that even if we were released from our shackles and shown the real objects themselves, we would be so confused by the unfamiliarity of what we were seeing that we would reject that new reality. And if we were shown the fire as the source of the false images, we would shrink away from it and turn back to the wall, seeking the familiar. If we were thrust outward into the light-drenched world, we would cringe in the blinding light and try to withdraw back into the darkness of the cave that is all that we have ever known. But gradually, we could grow accustomed to the light and gain an understanding of the sunlit reality of things.

The Apostle Paul says something similar, “For now we see as if in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face-to-face. Now I know only in part; but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Plato was describing the process of philosophical education, and Paul was envisioning how we will be in relationship when God's reign comes over the earth. Yet both are describing how it is possible to gain freedom from the confusion, bewilderment, and misunderstanding that characterizes so much of human life, how it is possible to finally awaken into the full consciousness for which we were born.

When this kind of seeing comes, what we see appears clear and vivid and beautiful. *To kalon* is not surface beauty as the world understands beauty. *To kalon* is a beautiful inner state of clarity that enables us to see beauty in the utterly real.

The Japanese use *wabi-sabi* to describe beauty. It is an aesthetic of poverty and loneliness, imperfection and austerity, affirmation and melancholy. *Wabi-sabi* is the beauty of the withered, weathered, tarnished, scarred, intimate, coarse, earthly, evanescent, tentative; ephemeral. Artist Leonard Koren observes that: “the closer things get to nonexistence, the more exquisite and evocative they become.” *Wabi-sabi* is a

broken earthenware cup in contrast to a Ming vase; a branch of autumn leaves in contrast to a dozen roses, a lined and bent old woman in contrast to a fashion model, a mature love as opposed to an infatuation, a bare wall with peeling paint in contrast to a wall hung with beautiful paintings.

Wabi-sabi gives us westerners a language for honouring the beauty in what is humble, imperfect, broken or passing away. We may already feel the poetry of these qualities, and yet we live in a culture that prefers to thoughtlessly throw things and people away as soon as they aren't young and shiny any more. *Wabi-sabi* redeems the poignant beauty of decay, which is as much a part of our reality as is emergence.

Of the various names for beauty we have touched, the Navaho word for beauty, *hózhó*, is the most comprehensive, perhaps because the Navajo way of life is aesthetic at its base. This is ironic as beauty is not, for the Navajo, an aesthetic concept: it is not about the way things appear. It refers equally to a state of human beings, a state of the objects around them, and a state of the universe as whole. It is usually translated into English as “beauty,” though also as “health,” “balance,” “harmony,” or “goodness”. It refers above all to the world when it is flourishing; it refers to the community flourishing in the world; it refers to things we make, which flourish and play a role in the flourishing of other things; and it refers to ourselves, flourishing as makers, as people inhabiting a community that inhabits a world. It is a word for the unity of all things when they are joined together in a wholesome state.

Our own culture and ethos grow out of Western, Christian, and scientific thinking. Thinkers in the Western tradition were, for centuries, keen on distinguishing and separating things: separating spirit from the body and from the natural world, separating emotion from intellect, separating woman from man, separating matter from matter by dismantling the world in the way that one dismantles a clock, dissects a cadaver, or shatters an atom, breaking it down into smaller and smaller parts, and examining those parts as separate things.

And we have learned a so much about the physical universe by doing that, and we became very industrious and materially powerful, in part because we also disconnected action from consequence, at least in our thinking. But as a result, we also found ourselves in an increasingly broken world, broken by our exploits, and broken by the fractured, fragmented way in which we see.

But we are gradually learning to see things anew. Ironically, the science that took the world apart is now showing us a planet and a universe that are intricately and fantastically interwoven. The industrial drive has given rise to a global economy and a global communications network. Through these lenses, we're learning to see that all humanity and all life are radically, inescapably interconnected.

But a strange aspect of our waking up to our interconnectedness is that it comes almost too late. Our science and economics can show us the extent and ways in which we are radically intertwined, but they don't necessarily offer us a beautiful, graceful, or redeeming vision of wholeness. But the wisdom of indigenous peoples can show us that.

In the Navajo sense of being, truth is in the whole and in the connections, not in the parts. Individual things have no life, no reality in themselves. Life is in the links, the connections and the relationships that unite the parts into oneness.

This is not only truth, but a beautiful truth. It offers a vision of health and restoration, of harmony and balance toward which we can move with desire and hope.

Concluding this exploration of beauty with *hózhó*—the flourishing of things as they live in wholeness and relationship with each other—allows us to hold all that came earlier in one comprehensive embrace: *beauty* as our longing for soulfulness; *yapha* as the bright, fleeting things that refresh our eyes with innocence and wonder; *sundara*, as our experience of the holy in the sensual; *to kalon*, as our capacity to perceive things as they truly are with pure, light-filled awareness; and *wabi-sabi*, honouring the beauty in what is broken and rough and stark.

May you walk in the beauty of holiness. It surrounds you. It infuses you. It inspires you. It connects you. It transforms you.